

# Aspects and Attitudes of Keeping Pet Rabbits in Australia

By Bryce Inglis  
Vice President Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage  
Proprietor Rabbit Run  
enquiries@rabbitrun.com.au

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## Rehoming

A recent phone survey by Rabbit Run-Away Orphanage (2010) established that the largest re-homer of rabbits in Victoria is the Australian Animal Protection Society (AAPS) followed by the RSPCA.

Rabbit Runaway Orphanage (RRO) a registered charity, in the first year of operation was the third largest re-homer of rabbits in Victoria. This is not a reflection of marketing power but rather a reflection of the current high kill rates at other shelters (80- 95%), which are unavoidable under current legislation

RRO rehomes lost or abandoned rabbits as well as those surrendered, where we try to work out the underlying issues causing the surrender with the owners if possible. However, the main purpose of RRO is to assist shelters and pounds with rehoming of their rabbits.

RRO works with the Lort Smith Animal Hospital, Animal Aid, Local Council Pounds such as Save a Dog and Australian Animal Protection Society. More and more of the smaller metropolitan and regional pounds, shelters and wildlife rescuers in Victoria are contacting RRO for assistance with rehoming as they feel they lack facilities or expertise in their care and rehoming.

## Legal Status of Rabbits

The State Departments of Primary Industry (DPI) are responsible for animal laws and welfare; however, as controllers of the feral population they are also the largest exterminator of rabbits in Australia. This leads to conflicting attitudes. DPI (Victoria) classifies all rabbits as feral unless micro chipped. Micro chipping of pet rabbits is rare and confined to rabbits purchased from shelters. The DPI was contacted recently concerning a permit to keep over 30 rabbits as required by law. The DPI did not have a category to keep rabbits for boarding or as orphans so they offered a permit to the founders of RRO and Rabbit Run boarding to farm rabbits for meat, which we found highly offensive and declined of course.

Rabbits have no legal status unless used in laboratories or for meat farming where they are covered by various codes of practice. Codes are not legally enforceable and are used to clarify the vagueness within the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986*. Usually these codes are written by the industry concerned. Codes of practice for the private keeping of rabbits and for the boarding of rabbits are in development by Rabbit Run (RR) to address their legal status. Current Codes of practice for the operation of shelters and pounds, pet shops and breeding exclude rabbits. *The Domestic Animals Act 1994 (feral and nuisance)* only covers dogs and cats. This Act serves as the State government instructions to councils. Usually when issues regarding rabbits are brought to the attention of local councils they are powerless to act (Sankoff & White, 2009).

An assessment of local laws (Victorian councils) regarding rabbits is underway by RR and the findings so far are showing a lack of science and logic. It is assumed that pet rabbits are kept outside, some councils classify rabbits incorrectly as rodents, one council states that the maximum number of domestic rabbits in residential zoning is zero but unlimited in farm zones. In other councils, the maximum number of rabbits allowed usually varies from two to ten, in some cases rabbits are not mentioned and a special permit is needed. Our local council permits a maximum of two (2) rabbits but anyone can have up to thirty rabbits under the age of three months, which acts as an open invitation for backyard breeders to breed and sell rabbits lawfully. The action of these backyard breeders (who are not registered breeders) sets in motion a cycle of breeding, abandonment, and high kill rates at shelters of our pet rabbits, many not surviving to see their first year of life. Rabbit Run is seeking to address this issue through the development of the code of practice for the private keeping of rabbits. The code is being written in response to a request from an RSPCA inspector to define cruelty.

### **Welfare Funds**

Government funding and grants are readily available for rabbit farming but are non-existent for rabbit welfare purposes. RRO currently has no government or corporate funding and relies on its members' contributions and the support of the founders of Rabbit Run boarding. The founders of Rabbit Run, who are also the primary carers of the orphans and suppliers of all equipment, facilities and overheads used by the RRO, supplied the shortfall of \$15,000 during the first year of operation.

### **Status of Rabbits**

**Shelters:** Rabbits are regarded as pocket pets by the president of the RSPCA (VIC) and their high kill rates reflect this (Wirth, 2010). Committees at many shelters also reflect this attitude. For example, rabbits at one shelter are housed in the cattery. An influx of cats is resolved by killing the rabbits. Their code of practice does not mention rabbits. Rabbits are the third highest number of pets killed in shelters.

**Pet shops:** Retail outlets that sell baby rabbits give little or no information upon the sale of a rabbit and are more interested in selling unsuitable hutches and accessories. The information if given is mostly misleading or incorrect. It is not unusual for rabbits to be purchased without any information about caring for the bunny and little regard to their needs or welfare. Rabbits are becoming more popular as pets due to the shift towards higher density living. A bill introduced by independent MP and Mayor of Sydney to prevent the sale of pets at pet shops in New South Wales was defeated.

**Internet sales:** RRO believes that the internet is becoming the preferred way to purchase pets and is the main marketing tool used by backyard breeders. Members of RRO monitor these sites and report any issues to the relevant authorities. RRO markets on these sites to promote responsible ownership and to prevent impulse buying. It is shameful to see the huge number of baby rabbits offered in time for Christmas or Easter and also offered as good breeders.

**The general population:** Most people that have not had a rabbit as a pet in their adult life believe rabbits are pests and uninformed owners of pet rabbits usually keep them outside. Australian temperatures are high enough to cause death, and feral foxes or dogs take many. The average lifespan of a rabbit outdoors is three years in comparison to 10 to 12 years as house rabbits.

**Uninformed owners** do not mosquito proof outdoor hutches, and there are no hutches sold on the market that are mosquito proof. A new strain of Myxomatosis was released around Dec 2009 with vets reporting deaths of pet rabbits over the whole of the Melbourne metropolitan area. Rabbit advocacy groups and vets are working to improve this situation through educating rabbit owners.

Most adoption enquiries received by RRO are requests for a single rabbit to live outdoors as this is the perceived way to keep rabbits. Once the potential owner has spoken to RRO and receives the correct information prior to adoption, they more than often go home with a bonded pair of house rabbits.

**Prospective Adoptees** who are unsure if a rabbit will fit into their lifestyle can become a foster carer and either return the rabbit or adopt it with a companion when they are ready. No financial outlay for either the rabbit or equipment is needed, and the carers receive ongoing support from RRO in developing their knowledge and care about rabbits. Mature male rabbits need 3 months before their hormones settle enough for bonding and females need to be 6 months old prior to spaying. We feel that this is a long time to be in our care and look to provide one on one care for them through our foster care program.

**Registered rabbit breeders** know little about the behaviour and needs of desexed rabbits to be kept as pets. Their knowledge of breeding and baby rabbits is sufficient, but the rabbit grows up and their needs and food changes and knowledge about desexing and vaccinations, potential health conditions, food requirements, companion bunnies, litter training and a keeping bunnies as house pets is non-existent. Registered breeders feel that de-sexing a rabbit makes it worthless (Carter, 2006). The rabbits are kept in small enclosures, feed a diet that has a high amount of pellets. Locally made pellets in Australia are designed to fatten rabbits quickly for the meat industry.

**Unregistered backyard breeders** have a similar lack of knowledge about desexed house rabbits as registered breeders. Additionally, backyard breeders are prolific and often operate unopposed by law, breeding and selling baby rabbits thru the internet. It is fashionable for 14-year-old girls to breed in response to internet suggestions of cool ways to make money.

### **Veterinary Practises**

In Victoria, there are three excellent rabbit savvy vet practices

Dr Narelle Walters – Melbourne Rabbit Clinic. Only treats rabbits.

Dr Brendon Carmel PhD – Warrenwood Veterinary Clinic and Melbourne University (teaches exotic pet medicine)

Dr Gerry Skinner PhD - Animal Emergency Centre Hallam.

There are five others vets who have enough experience for most needs and all details are listed on the RRO and RR websites.

Other States do not have as many vets who have specialised knowledge of rabbits.

Vets are legally obliged to kill all rabbits brought to them if found and there is no one to claim ownership (they are classified as feral), whether they are domestic or wild. RRO often takes in rabbits surrendered to vets.

The Australian Veterinary Association is campaigning for a myxomatosis vaccination to be made available to pet rabbits; this is unlikely to be successful due to the perception of rabbits as feral pests and the influence of lobby groups such as farmers and others.

## **Queensland**

In Queensland the keeping of domestic rabbits as pets is outlawed with a \$30,000 AUD fine for keeping them as pets, however registered magicians are exempt. Occasionally rescue groups assist to bring rabbits across the border into NSW, when an owner is at risk of having their pets taken from them. These “long eared guinea pigs” are precious pets to these people. Last year four rabbits were surrendered to RRO because their owners were relocated to Queensland.

## **Other States**

Victoria is leading the way in all aspects of rabbit welfare in comparison to other states. There are no suitable boarding facilities for rabbits and any available are outside. Vets and shelters have limited experience and accommodation to deal with rabbits.

## **Products**

Products for pet rabbits are rare, most sold are a waste of money and are not suitable for rabbits. Rabbit Run is developing products as a secure source of funding for RRO. Rabbit Run is starting to investigate franchising to create cash flow for product development in order to support RRO.

## **Boarding Establishments**

Boarding of rabbits is a new concept in Australia and RR was the first to operate a boarding service, however, others have started to board rabbits without permits or licences. Breeders who board usually do so outside, some without mosquito protection, some utilise small breeding hutches. Dog kennels and catteries are also starting to board rabbits along with dogs and cats but usually do not have enough expertise or knowledge of rabbits to ensure their adequate care.

RR is the only boarding facility that utilises full environmental control through the use of air conditioners, hospital grade air purifiers (including killing of virus) and heaters to maintain air quality and temperature. RR is developing a code of practice for boarding rabbits to set a minimum standard for boarding.

## **Pet Rabbits in the wild**

RRO has rescued three bunnies from a building site at Docklands in the last three months (originally domestic pet bunnies). The owners of this site were telling us that the rabbits on the building sites are becoming more numerous. They believe that there are dozens in the Docklands precinct and rapidly increasing in numbers. The offspring, born on the site, easily adapt to domestication. The RSPCA and Melbourne Council were both unresponsive to calls in regard to catching them. We are concerned about going to council as they may bait and kill the bunnies – we need a concerted rescue and rehoming effort like they the one instigated by rescue groups in Sydney, where over thirty were taken to a university to train students in rabbit desexing procedures and were then rehomed. In our local area, the Dandenong Ranges, a small scale landscaper has reported two separate colonies of

rabbits on private property. Compulsory desexing would minimise this problem. CSIRO research claims that pet rabbits cannot survive in the wild. Rabbit Advocacy groups supports the view by RRO that there are flaws in their arguments and will contact CSIRO in the future about this matter.

### **Other groups**

Apart from Rabbit Runaway Orphanage, Victoria has two other active groups concerned with rabbits:

- Boing on Line, which issues a monthly newsletter and has an informative website
- Radical Rabbit describing themselves as “a group of passionate vegan bunny lovers who have had enough of the use and abuse of rabbits as food, fur, lab testing and prison pets”

Other groups that are less active are

- House rabbit society of Australia  
New articles are dated 2001 and emails are unanswered.
- Australian Rabbit Companion
- Various smaller chat rooms

International chat rooms also attract participants, Fuzzy rabbit originated in Victoria

Most other animal welfare organisations have little or no concern with rabbit welfare.

### **Where to from here?**

We are fortunate to live in an area where we can connect with the natural world. To wake up to the sound of the kookaburra’s laughter and other bird songs, to be high above the polluted air of civilisation, where we can reflect on what we are doing to the earth and the attitudes of many who believe man owns everything upon it. We, like others see that there is a relationship between how we treat our pets, and our care of the earth. Caring for our pets is a tangible way to increase our awareness as custodians instead of owners of the earth and all upon it.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were regarded as property and without any rights. It took over 100 years for them to gain the status that they now have. Perceptions and attitudes needed to bring change take time. The current law considers animals as property, just as women were perceived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, man’s relationship with animals and nature will be the next social justice movement and be part of the overall changes in how we view the earth and its resources. The intrinsic values of all things upon the earth need consideration for if we do not take care for the earth and its creatures, then the earth cannot support us (Inglis, 2008).

Of all the animals, our pets share the closest relationship with man , rabbit owners reject the use of their pets as food or clothing, our pets can be a bridge to a civilised society’s view of all animals. Would other pet owners eat their cats or dogs? Pet owners that have house rabbits are repulsed at the thought of our domestic pets being breed for the food industry. Seeing a pet rabbit being put in a bag to be taken home to be slaughtered is heartbreaking. Would you put up with this behaviour if it were a cat or dog, domestic or feral? In some cultures, this is considered acceptable.

Animal laws need changing from 19<sup>th</sup> century values to reflect modern opinion. Rabbits in Australia are the forgotten pets and the lack of laws for them reflects this. There is an opportunity to create

new rabbit specific laws with 21<sup>st</sup> century values. The apathy surrounding rabbits can be used due to the lack opposition from anti-legislative lobby groups operating from a self-interested view.

Codes of practice are not law but if written in a common sense way can be used by those who are involved in animal welfare . Changes to law take time and the indifference to amendment and introduction of new law needs to be overcome.

Where to from here?

RR will address all the areas discussed in this summary and will continue into the future by the committee and volunteers of RRO.

## References

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